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ABSTRACT

The ideas of the populist George S. Counts on education's role in fostering democratic economic change are relevant to a consideration of modern problems and the prospects for American socialism (defined here as community and worker control of economic production). Counts, writing in the 1920s and 1930s, felt strongly that capitalism no longer worked and that it bred a debasing economic individualism growing out of merchants' ideas of economic freedom. He called for a planned, socialized economy unopposed to the traditional individualism of the independent family farmer. Counts' strong belief in democracy and in the schools' role in its maintenance led to his theories that education cannot be neutral and that it should help bring about the new economic order. Like current Marxist educational critics, Counts understood schools' functions in maintaining the established order, but unlike them he offered ideas for school reform applicable to the present. Today's progressives who see that the limits to growth will soon require a new economic order can find much relevance in Counts' emphases on democracy, the need for social change, the necessity for socialism to spring from within America, and the schools' potential role in assisting social change. (RW)

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An Historical Analysis of the Educational Ideas of George S. Counts and the Role of the School in the Modern Social Orier.

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Nearly fifty years have passed since George S. Counts presented Dare the School Build a New Social Order? A brief yet fiery piece, it posed to American educators a challenge of many dimensions. Though much has changed in the intervening years, it can also be said that much remains the same.

This paper will explore several reasons why Counts's ideas hold much relevance for the present. As Harold G. Shane has recently written, "Counts's early views on social reconstruction in a depressed era skidding toward a catastrophic war remain impressive and relevant in the distressed and even more dangerous world of the Eighties" (1981,p. 312). To examine this relevance, then, I have chosen to analyze several of Counts's most salient views in relationship to modern socialism in America. That is, what did Counts offer and in what ways can his ideas contribute to the birth of a new social order, keeping in mind that it is the role of the school on which the focus is made?

To fulfill this examination the paper puts forth Counts's position on the economic order, the democratic needs of the curriculum, the idea of neutrality, and the role of the school and teachers as progressive agents. As a conclusion to the paper, these ideas are then assessed within the context of recent socialist possibilities.

Before discussing these topics, attention must briefly be given to the concept of socialism as it is employed herein. To the extent that it is possible, I use socialism to mean

those groups and viewpoints which subscribe to, in varied but related forms, community and worker control of production or its decision making apparatus. Included also are those who favor substantial popular and worker input but do not necessarily favor worker ownership of all production factors. Thus defined, one can include a broad range of progressive groups and outlooks ranging from populists a la Barry Commoner's Citizens Party to certain types of neo-Marxists. Counts, for the record, was of the progressive-populist tradition in America and was not a follower of Marxist doctrines.

The analysis is historical not only because of what Counts offers to the educator of the present but also because of the danger to educators in ignoring the past. The result of such neglect is that "the language of learning tends to be apolitical and ahistorical, thus hiding the complex nexus of political and economic power and resources that lies behind a considerable amount of curriculum organization and selection" (Apple 1979, p. 29).

It is useful to begin this analysis by examining precisely what Counts desired in a new order since this will provide a general structure within which to compare his proposals with those of contemporary socialism. More agreement than disagreement exists between these two perspectives when one considers the general ends desired.

The most controversial element within Counts's position concerned the matter of economics. His interpretation of

events and circumstances during the depression period convinced him that the era of economic individualism had drawn to a close. In his view the individualism of classical economics no longer existed and circumstances cried out for its replacement. This was essential if democracy was to survive and this meant that a new collectivist reality would have to replace the exhausted individualistic notions of a bygone age.

According to Counts's close friend John L. Childs, the system of laissez faire had long been abandoned. Private monopoly and the extension of government regulation had all but abolished the traditional postulates of economic individualism which had their faith in the benevolent and automatic operation of the competitive market system. The chief problem was that the transition had been made neither systematically nor democratically (1956,p. 232). To Counts the issue hinged not on whether industrialism would be accepted, that was a foregone conclusion, but rather on the question of who would control the machines. In whose interest and for what purposes were their fruits to be used? His answer was for the promotion of the welfare of the great masses of the people (1932).

Whatever capitalism's benefits had been in the past, and Counts conceded they had been many, he was satisfied that it was no longer viable. He opposed it because it deified the principle of selfishness, it exalted the profit motive, it relied upon the forces of competition, it placed

property rights above human rights, and by order of circumstances it would have to be altered radically or eliminated. Though the urge for private gain had a debasing effect on everything from business, recreation, religion, and art, to friendship, the indictment did not have to be drawn on moral grounds alone, For Ccunts, it was drawn because capitalism no longer worked (1932).

It was a system that could no longer organize and maintain production. In addition to being cruel and inhumane, it was wasteful and inefficient. It exploited natural resources without the slightest regard for the future needs of our society and it forced technology to serve the interests of the few rather than the many. Given the growth of science and technology, Counts believed it was time to replace ignorance with knowledge, competition with cooperation, trust in providence with careful planning, and private capitalism with some form of socialized economy (1932, p. 45).

On this last point the Marxists are more articulate and have addressed some of the more detailed operations of not only a capitalist economy, but the way in which it manifests itself in both the workplace and the school. (Bowles and Gintis, 1975). As to the exact form a collective economy would take, Counts didn't say. He was primarily concerned with the values to be encompassed within the system regardless of its actual inner workings.

A point to be made concerning any attack on individualism

within a so called 'free enterprise' economy is that the fear of losing individualism has served, probably more than any other aspect, to cause a popular rejection of socialism in America. On this point, however, Counts offered an interesting explanation.

He held that the individualistic tradition in America had two separate roots which were widely different in origin and social implication. One was the individualism of the pioneer and the farmer, and the other was the individualism of capitalistic enterprise. The individualism of the pioneer was a product of the settlement of the land, of the march of the pioneer across the continent, and of a peculiar set of conditions that prevailed in American agriculture for generations. A central fact, however, was that this represented familism rather than individualism. More often than not the family was the centralizing and foundational unit. In Counts's estimation, "that fine independence of spirit, which is one of the most precious spiritual possessions of the American people, was nurtured on the economic security provided by the family" (1935, p. 697).

The individualism of capitalistic enterprise represented a different set of values. This force was led by merchants and tradesmen who, by demanding freedom for economic enterprise, were gradually able to overcome feudal aristocracy. They formulated a social philosophy congenial to their "temper and aspirations, and in general well suited to release the

creative and productive power of the age" (1935, p. 697).

The basic difference between these two traditions, and a significant one indeed, was that the individualistic farmers asserted their independence of society while the individualistic merchants made society the scene of their operations. Therefore, Counts was able to call for a planned, coordinated, and socialized economy which would be managed in the interests of the people, and he did so without fear of running against what was taken as the accepted definition of American individualism. It simply came down to an understanding of what constituted that spirit of individualism and he chose not to cloak it in the economic definition of laissez faire.

Clearly, Counts's outlook had been shaped by his rugged rearing on America's frontier. His ideas, moreover, were also a reflection of much that has been attributed to that populist tradition. He did not, therefore, attempt to fit any predetermined ideas onto American circumstances but sought instead to examine the uniqueness of the American situation and deal with the need for change within that context. He did not feel compelled to rely on deterministic or economically pure theoretical constructs. His views possessed American, not foreign, roots. This is an important distinction because it meant that the uniquely American condition had to be examined based on the forces and historical backdrop which gave it its existence.

A fresh thesis of Martin Carnoy and Derek Shearer supports

the basic position held by Counts. In a recent review of their new book, Michael Harrington cited the following passage: "The roots of a movement for economic democracy in the United States, if such a movement develops, will be not in the European socialist tradition, but in the American radical tradition of populism, whose primary value was always democracy" (1980, p. 34).

Though Counts and modern socialists would appear to be in agreement, at least as far as broad outlines for a socialized America are concerned, Counts was primarily interested in democracy and it was within that realm that he saw the American public school playing a major role. It is the central theme of his educational outlook to which our attention will now turn.

Counts's socialist inclinations stemmed from his deep belief in democracy and he envisaged the future as necessarily encompassing the democratic heritage and improving upon it. Democracy was to be maintained as a great social faith and the school was to be a powerful agent in its maintenance. He believed that, as a system and a process, it implicitly gave life to the idea that society would and could seek to better itself. For him, education and democracy were inextricably interwoven. As a result, he placed great faith in the school's role of advancing democratic principles.

He found the manner in which the problem of education was being attacked in the industrial society to be deficient.

It was deficient largely because it ignored the social order. The future historian, he suggested, would look back and see an educational system extremely busy with many things, some of which were important. But that historian would be amazed by the absence of any vigorous and concerted effort to discover the educational implications of the industrial civilization—a civilization which overwhelmed and transformed the traditional social order.

The school needed to function in the building of a new civilization. Instead, it occupied itself with the construction of tests or a marking scale—symbols of which Marxists categorize as capitalist tools of the "hidden curriculum." As a result, Counts charged that a very large part of American educational thought, inquiry, and experimentation was much ado about nothing. All the motion was encouraged and supported so that the schools would keep out of mischief. In this way they would not incur the serious displeasure of their elders (1932, p. 4).

He preferred that the schools seek to enlist the energies and talents of the rising generation in the realization of a program dedicated to "conserving and re-enforcing the great cultural pattern of democracy" (1939, p. 32). Teachers therefore could not evade the responsibility of participating actively in the task of reconstituting the democratic ideal and consequently working positively toward a new society (1933, p. 19).

His justification for using the schools to aid in achieving democratic goals rested on the premise that the schools were charged with such political obligations. He saw the schools as the life support system of democracy and believed sincerely that America's constitutional system could never have survived without the system of common schools. Moreover, in his opinion the existence and maintenance for almost two centuries of a constitutional system based on the foundations of popular freedom represented one of humankinds most remarkable achievements (1962, p. 4).

The articles of faith which he considered to be inherent under a democracy can be summarized briefly as follows: that the individual human being is of unsurpassing worth and this must always be kept in mind because all of the other articles derive their justification from the assumption of this; that the earth's materials and culture belong to all the people and none of it is to be regarded as the exclusive possession of any "superior" race, or people, or class; that people can and should rule themselves which negates even the potential for benevolent despots; that the human mind can be trusted and set free to inquire, to learn, to think, and to speak, and that the only trustworthy guardian of freedom is an informed and disciplined mind; that peace is immeasurably superior to the method of war and that war and military habits are hostile to democracy's spirit; and that whenever any minority employs the liberties of democracy to corrupt or de-

stroy those liberties, it forfeits its moral right to the guarantees and protections of a free society (1941,p.25-26).

It is evident from these articles of faith that Counts did not see the worth of democracy as a simple preservation of existing institutions. Rather, he saw it as a sentiment with respect to the equality of all people, and it was to take the form of an aspiration towards a society in which the sentiment would find complete fulfillment. According to Counts, the central part of any program in defense of democracy had to be an honest and vigorous effort to apply these ideas, values, and outlooks to our life and institutions—

> to bring economic power under popular control, to release the energies of technology, to root out every kind of special privilege and corruption, to promote toleration, understanding, and brotherhood among races, peoples, and religions, to conduct an unrelenting war on poverty and human misery, to guard civil rights and liberties as a priceless heritage, to prosecute the free and untrammeled search for knowledge in all fields, and to engage positively in the creation of a civilization of justice, beauty, humanity, and grandeur (1939, p. 13).

These ideas represent a stirring challenge for American education to realize its true worth and purpose and contribute to the remaking of the social order. To be sure Counts did not believe that the school could by itself remake civilization. Instead he called for a forging together of the progressive and democratic forces within society to bring about a movement of which the school would be only a part. In Counts's words, "To what extent the school can influence the direction of social

evolution is perhaps an open question; but certainly if it is to achieve this result it must articulate with its own age. Moreover, that it can in any fundamental sense create the impulses which drive society onward, is highly improbable. In a word, the school cannot build a Utopia" (1929, p. 67-68).

While Counts was not so quixotic as to envision the school in the forefront of social change, he did believe that it should be in harmony with the natural progressive tendencies of the civilized order. For this to occur, teachers would have to be re-educated. That is, teachers would have to survey industrial civilization in order to penetrate beneath what was visible only to the naked eye. Their pedagogy would have to be built upon a firm social foundation. One can state with little risk of inaccuracy that teacher education today is in no less need of such an underpinning.

A clear understanding of the civilization being served was a pivotal aim in Counts's position. It was absolutely essential that this understanding be present. Otherwise, attempts to modify existing conditions would be ill-fated. He did not believe, moreover, that the school would be controlled by the teaching profession operating as an independent force but rather by the teaching profession working in cooperation with the educational authority created by the community. The power of decision resides in the community and the decisions made by teachers would always have to be guided by the welfare of children and society.

In this sense teachers occupied a unique position in

society since they represented no special class or interest of the moment but instead represented the common and abiding interests of all the people. Given this responsibility, teachers were under heavy obligation to protect and further those interests and in so doing they would have to take their place among those groups which were seeking democratic social reform. No longer could teachers accept docile roles as mere transmitters of the predominant social heritage.

To seek democratic ends through the agency of the school was completely consistent with the ideals of the society as outlined in its great historic documents. To educate the young for democratic living was in keeping with one of the most fundamental justifications for the existence of common schools—to educate for democracy.

The preceding pages have outlined, albeit summarily, the basic tenets of Counts's educational position. But if there is relevance to be found for today, how is this to be interpreted? And with changes in conditions, can the same assumptions of yesteryear be employed in attempts to bring about social change now?

To answer these questions one must consider the changes in economic circumstances which have occurred in the last half century. During the 1930's Counts attacked capitalism because while people were hungry and jobless, shops had food and factories lay idle. A system which could not address basic human needs even though it had vast resources at its

disposal, needed to be restructered with the benefit of the masses in view. He also believed that technology had eliminated any justification for poverty since goods and services could be provided in abundance. The only thing that prevented the dissolution of economic woes was not the inability to provide for the needs of people but rather that goods were produced for profit only.

Clearly, despite the promises of supply-side economic adherents, unlimited growth is either impossible for the future or can be achieved only at unacceptable costs to the future eco-system of the planet. This thesis is persuasively set forth in Jeremy Rifkin's books The Emerging Order (1979) and the more recent Entropy (1980). Not only are the levels of resources in fixed quantities on this planet, but they tend toward a state of existence where they are not useable any longer as implied by the process of entropy.

If one assumes that the future will not be visited by unlimited growth, does it follow from there that a more just, humane society is not a realistic hope either? Not necessarily. Though the future is frought with many potential dangers, they can be accomodated if preparations are made to facilitate a smooth transition. To do this, sacred cows of the past will have to give way. In fact, to continue holding on to world views that promise more abundance for all can only aggravate the level of disappointment when it finally arrives. In addition, realizing limitations on future economic growth holds

open the potential for more equitable and humanly oriented economic structures, juxtaposed to the present arrangement which leaves no alternative to a mad scramble for dwindling resources.

The Marxist Perspective

In recent years the schools have been the targets of attack from almost every quarter and for a plethora of reasons. The chorus has achieved such volume that the very future of public education is now in danger. One of the most damaging voices has come from the left and employs a Marxist perspective. That is, they argue that the schools serve to recreate the established order which serves the ruling and capitalist class. This is done, for the most part they claim, by producing a mass labor force. In addition, the Marxists have employed the dialectic in examining the schools and have attempted to expose internal contradictions while drawing analyses of the close relationship between the structure and outlook of the schools and that of the capitalist social order (Bowles and Gintis, 1975; Sarap, 1978).

When all is said and done, the Marxist analysis is complete and true to its guiding principles. "But," as William A. Proefriedt has noted, "their warning remains peripheral to the development of their own argument. It is never incorporated in a way that permits formulation of a theoretical base for school reforms that complement a socialist restructuring of society" (1980, p. 473).

This crucial component has been absent from Marxist criticisms of the schools and though Counts wrote during a different era, he did address the possibilities that existed for the school's contribution. As Proefriedt further stated, "a socialist educational philosophy should not fail to probe more deeply into the question of what kind of role teachers and schools might play in the context of a more interactional understanding of historical change" (1980, p. 473). Counts's call for pedagogical education which would be steeped in grasping the social and historical implications of schools and teachers has been discussed above. Furthermore he did consider an important function of the school in helping to bring about a better social order. Marxists offer little short of holding the revolution and then reforming the schools in the light of the new order (Bowles and Gintis, 1975).

The problem for the schools is that since they are bombarded with criticism from their perennial attackers (i.e. proponents of parochiaid, supporters of segregation, etc.) which is now coupled with the salvos from the left, they are prone to become even more impotent as a source for social betterment. Society has looked to the schools to help solve so many social problems that the tendency is toward ever growing numbers of people who are dissatisfied with the school's potential. When that feeling approaches a level of consensus it will be impossible to rally any meaningful

coalition that seeks to enlist the school as an agent of social change.

Another point to consider in this vein is that even though schools have been guilty of certain manifestations as unveiled by Marxist analysis, it does not necessarily hold that these were intended outcomes. As John I. Goodlad has insightfully stated, "What schools have done is not necessarily what they should have done" (1979, p. 2). In other words, despite the discoveries of some revisionists, many of the stated ideals of the common school are still appropriate goals even if they have not been fully realized.

Counts was also keenly aware of the class biases within the school structure. In several of his seminal works, including The Selective Character of American Secondary Education (1922), The Social Composition of Boards of Education (1927), and School and Society in Chicago (1928), he demonstrated that the public schools were serving the needs, primarily, of the favored classes and also that certain quarters within the community tended to have influence over school programs in disproportionate levels to their numbers. He did not, however, see this entirely within the rubric of capitalist evils. And despite his awareness of these factors, he concerned himself with what could be done by the schools to overcome some of these conditions.

It is evident that Counts did not shy away from calling for awakening the school as a progressive institution. To

the contrary, he met the issue head-on and it is an issue that is far from resolved when one seeks an explanation for what the purpose of education is in a democratic society. Those who opposed using the school in this way tended to favor a program that developed the cognitive and critical skills of the youngsters without imposing any societal view upon them. They were most sympathetic to an education which was chiefly centered upon the child and in short, saw education as a neutral endeavor.

The Issue of Neutrality

Counts's position of using education to inculcate deep democratic sympathies among the young was completely antithetical to the posture of those who promoted a neutral ideology. They eschewed the concept of directly influencing the child, or so they believed. C.A. Bowers, in The Progressive Educator and the Depression, provided an example of the tormented position held by these educators when he explained that they became chilled at the thought of indoctrination but rather preferred that the "American dream could best be realized by changing the 'hearts' of the students and making them more critically minded" (1969, p. 18). But they failed to delineate just how the hearts of the students were to be changed. They called on education to have a vision, but the nature and context of that vision were never put forth. Their vision contained no content of the good life.

Counts placed little faith in the notion that if young-

sters were given an opportunity to see the true facts they would naturally come down on the side of democracy. To demonstrate the point he related a conversation he once had with A.V. Lunacharsky, the Commissar of Education in the Russian Republic until 1929. Mr. Lunacharsky had assured Counts on that occasion that Soviet educational leaders did not believe in indoctrinating the children in the ideas and principles of communism. When Counts queried whether the children became good communists while attending the schools, Lunacharsky answered that the great majority did. Counts sought an explanation to this remarkable phenomenon and was informed that "Soviet teachers merely tell their children the truth about human history. As a consequence practically all of the more intelligent boys and girls adopt the philosophy of communism." Counts then recalled his rearing in a Methodist sect which also confined its teachings to the truth (1932, p. 8).

He objected to the claims that schools ought to be neutral and defended his position on the grounds that all education contained a large element of imposition, that this was inevitable, that society's existence and evolution depended upon it, that as a result it was eminently desirable, and that the frank acceptance of this fact by the educator was a major professional obligation. More important was his point that a failure to do this represented a repudiation of a most crucial educational responsibility, the clothing of one's

own prejudices in the garb of universal truth, and the introduction into the theory of education of an element of obscurantism (1932 a).

Beyond this he noted that our democracy itself was not founded under the aegis of neutrality. The cause of liberty and the protection over time of fundamental liberties suggested a vision worthy of continued pursuit. Moreover, the younger generation was entitled to such a vision. Walter Lippmann described it thus: "if a civilization is to be coherent and confident it must be known in that civilization what its ideals are. There must exist in the form of clearly available ideas an understanding of what the fulfillment of that civilization might mean, an imaginative conception of the good at which it might, and, if it is to flourish, at which it must aim" (1929, p. 322). In this statement Lippmann set forth the very essence of what Counts had characterized. Only through an adequate vision based on democratic values could the young be able to find their place in the world and at the same time improve upon it.

Counts envisaged the many challenges which would likely confront the coming generation and he believed that the future of democracy, whether it would survive and if so in what form, would be decided by it. In spite of the likelihood of future viscissitudes, he warned that the teaching of blind loyalties to democracy's traditional machinery would doubtless be the surest way of destroying it. He warned,

therefore, against the teaching of any dogmas or doctrines as fixed and final.

He favored the development of independent and critical minds among the members of the younger generation, which one must realize is itself the imposition of a preferred position. Yet who would object to educating with these qualities of mind as a goal? They are essential to the individual who is able to freely choose for himself or herself. He favored then, not the ramming of something down the throats of students, but rather the critical examination of our institutions so that a more complete fulfillment of the democratic faith in the United States could be realized.

Finally, let me summarize the components of Counts's call and suggest their applicability for today. First of all the essential strength and the ever present theme in the case that he made was democratic. He drew his vision from the historical ideals as set forth in the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution, along with his interpretation of what the long march of civilization held as a promise to future generations. Democracy and the realization of the democratic dream make his proposals relevant to us today.

While he did not see the answers to all problems in a remaking of the economic system, he did favor such alterations. He did not ask if the school could build a new economic order but rather the entire social order. His considerations were

more sweeping and less deterministic. Nonetheless, he believed that any movements designed to restructure the social and economic order would have to be present within the currents of society itself. This belief is consistent with the view held by most modern socialists. If the progressive forces would coalesce into a new progressive movement, they could then appropriate Counts's notion that the school be used as an engine for democracy. The control of the economy, resources, and forces of production could become more democratic in the process; varied though the forms may be that such economic democracy might ultimately take. Again, the schools cannot do it alone. They could, however, serve as a meaningful accompaniment.

The great appeal in this is that the transformation would be peaceful, intelligent, and democratic. To bring about a new order by violating democratic means will in all likelihood destroy the democratic ends sought. R. Freeman Butts underlined this point, which Counts often made, by stating that "undemocratic means destroy democratic ends. Such means, if long continued and widely practiced may bring twilight both to American education and to American democracy" (1976, p. 14).

Dare the school build a new social order? The answer today is the same one offered fifty years ago; no. Not alone. Society will be remade when the progressive and liberal forces unite to bring into existence the democratic

order which is in keeping with our great national heritage. If this is to occur the school will have to educate for democracy and teachers will have to become liberators of the democratic tradition. The challenge remains and the case for democracy is no less cogent than at any time in our history. The only question remaining is whether democracy will become a reality.

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